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For Duty and Honor: Tennessee's Mexican War Experience

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Review

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Johnson, Timothy D. *For Duty and Honor: Tennessee's Mexican War Experience*. University of Tennessee Press, 2018. \$39.95 ISBN 9781621904380

Timothy D. Johnson of Nashville's Lipscomb University has a well-deserved reputation as a leading historian of the Mexican War. In *For Duty and Honor*, he studies the political, military and social aspects of the war as it affected Tennesseans of the day, both at home and at the front. The result is a well-written book of remarkable depth that will set the standard for future state and/or unit studies on that oft-neglected war of expansion.

Johnson notes that approximately 5,400 Tennesseans saw service during the war, in five regiments of infantry and one of mounted troops. Yet, only two (the First and Second Tennessee) saw any significant action, and their experiences differed both in the war and in the postwar perception of the veterans and the society to which they returned. The bloody success enjoyed by the First Tennessee at Monterrey in September, 1846 under Zachary Taylor and the regiment's subsequent honorable service under Winfield Scott reflected glory on the men of the regiment. In contrast, the gallant but failed attack of the Second Tennessee at Cerro Gordo under the dubious direction of Gideon Pillow left a bitter taste in the mouths of the largely West Tennessee men of that regiment.

Johnson's exhaustive research enables him to blend the tactical and operational aspects of the Tennesseans' service with the interesting personal experiences of the men who served. In that connection, Johnson tells of Tennesseans in camp and battle, and of the wonder of young men in a strange, foreign and ultimately hostile land. As is almost always the case, the personal motivations of the individual soldiers varied. Some goals were of a broader sort—vindicating state and national honor, avenging the Alamo, or reflecting Tennessee's close connections to Texas. Other motivations were personal—seeking adventure, or pursuing personal honor and glory.

While there was much initial enthusiasm for the war at home in Tennessee, it did not extinguish the strength of the Tennessee Whigs' political opposition to James K. Polk, and Johnson details how war-weariness enabled the Whigs to win a close election for governor in 1847 even as the war wound down with an American victory. Johnson also notes a moral element to the anti-war sentiment, as there was a pacifist element to the Restoration Movement, itself inspired by the Second Great Awakening.

Gideon Pillow was not the only Tennessean whose Mexican War experiences set the stage for their service in the Civil War. Johnson also follows the varied experiences of future Confederate major generals Benjamin Franklin Cheatham and William B. Bate, as well as lesser known Civil War officers such as Thomas Claiborne and Samuel R. Anderson. Johnson tells the story the mortal wounding of Tom Ewell, who was comforted in his final hours by both Claiborne and his brother, future Confederate Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell, with Claiborne promising to let their friends at home in Tennessee know of Tom's gallantry.

Claiborne's promise to promote young Ewell's memory reflects on the post-war experience of Tennessee's Mexican War veterans, who were to some extent obscured by the state's cataclysmic experience during the Civil War. Johnson writes that Tennessee veterans became active in an organized movement to garner recognition and respect for their service, most notably in the form of pensions from the Federal government. Initially, Reconstruction political considerations intervened, as some of the pensions were seen to have gone to benefit men who later served the Confederacy. Persistence paid off, however in 1887. Afterwards, as Johnson notes on page 231, it was "memory, nostalgia and fraternity [which] collectively served as the primary reason for the existence of veterans organizations, and perhaps shaping [positive] memory was its most important function."

Johnson concludes with his personal involvement in a project to identify the remains of American soldiers buried near a Mexican fort at Monterrey. The late Captain Jim Page, historian of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell near the Tennessee-Kentucky line, surmised that these were men were Tennesseans. Johnson has been involved in an effort to identify these men through modern genealogical research and DNA testing. That effort, along with a controversial proposal to move James K. Polk's remains from the grounds of the Tennessee Capitol to a home he lived in as a young man, proves, as Johnson observes on page 239, that "the final chapter of Tennessee's Mexican War legacy is yet to be written."

Sam D. Elliott is a practicing attorney in Chattanooga, Tennessee and a former president of the Tennessee Bar Association. He is the author or editor of five books on the Civil War, the latest being John C. Brown of Tennessee: Rebel, Redeemer and Railroader (2017), the winner of the 2017 Tennessee History Book Award.